CHAPTER TWO

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY WITTGENSTEIN

There is a universal recognition that there are two developments of Wittgenstein (although some speak of a third Wittgenstein), namely, the early one of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and the mature one of the *Philosophical Investigations* (and the supposed third one is that of *On Certainty*). But however different the early Wittgenstein is from the mature one (and also the supposed third one), there is a single unvarying theological theme that runs through all of them. In discussing this theme it is certainly apt to start with the early Wittgenstein. This chapter argues that there is a theology of sorts that underpins the thought of the early Wittgenstein (i.e. the pre-1930 Wittgenstein of the *Notebooks*, *Tractatus*, and *Lecture on Ethics*), and that theology is mysticism (and, contrary to what some leading commentators say, not pantheism). To prove this point, significant parallels are drawn between the early Wittgenstein’s theology and the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite and those that followed in his footsteps such as John Scottus Eriugena and St. Thomas Aquinas. The manner of presenting this point is as follows. Section I argues that the early Wittgenstein is a theologian of sorts inasmuch as his philosophical thought is underpinned by a theology, and this theology is mysticism, not pantheism, as some respected commentators see. Section II presents features of the early Wittgenstein’s theology. Section III presents features of the Pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology. Section IV concludes this chapter with the claim that the theology of the early Wittgenstein belongs in the lineage of the Pseudo-Dionysian theology.

I. The mystical Wittgenstein

The following are among the earliest passages to give a glimpse of Wittgenstein’s theological position:

The world is *given* me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from the outside as into something that is already there.
That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will. *However this may be,* at any rate we are in a certain sense dependent, and what we are dependent on we call God.

In this sense God would simply be fate, or, what is the same thing: The world—which is independent of our will. (NB 8.7.16)

How things stand, is God.
God is, how things stand. (NB 1.8.16)

*How the world is,* is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world. (TLP, 6.432)

The God presented in the *Notebooks* appears to be the God of pantheism. But Wittgenstein seems to reverse himself in the *Tractatus* as the God he presents there appears to be of deism. In the early Wittgenstein there are two polar opposite theological positions that can be seen. In an intellectual culture that cannot tolerate contradictions, the sympathetic reader’s reflex action, quite understandably, is geared to find a way to make a coherent reading. There are three possible ways to go: (1) take Wittgenstein to have started as a pantheist in the *Notebooks* and end up a deist in the *Tractatus*; (2) take him to have remained a pantheist and the seemingly deist comments he makes in the *Tractatus* must be read through pantheistic lenses; and (3) take him as neither merely a pantheist nor merely a deist but that the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus* express two opposite sides of a dialectical position.

It is interesting that at least three commentators who are recognized to be among the most authoritative, Newton Garver, Brian McGuinness, and Eddy Zemach see Wittgenstein to be a pantheist of sorts.

>[NB 1. 8. 16: “How things stand, is God. God is, how things stand”] express what God is in terms very like those used in the *Tractatus* to say what the world is or what a fact is, and therefore they suggest either a pantheism of sorts or else a change of mind in the intervening two years. The second alternative has a superficial plausibility, but in the absence of other evidence of a change of mind it must be wrong.... Wittgenstein, although unwilling to allow it in print, continued to hold on to that pantheism and to the ethical views associated with it. (Garver 1971, 124 and 136)

If...God is the essence of the world, the world’s meaning and form, then we know much more about God than we thought we knew. For the essence of the world, its form, etc., is nothing but the *general form of the proposition.* Let us consider the following propositions: ‘The general